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SEMANTICS AND THE STUDY OF CULTURE.

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TO SECURE A BETTER ALIGNMENT OF THEIR MENTAL PICTURES WITH "EXTERNAL REALITY," MEN NEED TO PAY CLOSER ATTENTION TO WORD MEANING, PARTICULARLY WHEN CONVEYING INFORMATION ABOUT A CULTURE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN. THE TRANSFER OF MEANING WITHOUT CONFUSION WILL OCCUR MORE READILY IF THE FOLLOWING POINTS FROM GENERAL SEMANTICS ARE KEPT IN MIND--(1) "NO TWO THINGS ARE IDENTICAL, AND NO ONE THING REMAINS THE SAME." (2) "THE SAME WORD MAY BE USED TO CONNOTE DIFFERENT 'REALITIES,' WHILE SIMILAR EVENTS OR EXPERIENCES ARE SOMETIMES CALLED BY DIFFERENT NAMES." (3) "STATEMENTS OF OPINION ARE OFTEN CONFUSED WITH STATEMENTS OF FACT." (4) "IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO TELL ALL ABOUT ANYTHING." AMONG TECHNIQUES FOR APPLYING GENERAL SEMANTICS ARE (1) USING DESCRIPTIVE TERMS RATHER THAN THOSE OF APPROVAL OR DISAPPROVAL, (2) USING PHRASES THAT SPECIFY THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A STATEMENT, (3) BECOMING MORE ALERT TO CULTURAL SEMANTIC CONDITIONING, AND (4) BEING SUSPICIOUS OF ONE'S OWN KNOWLEDGE. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "SOCIAL EDUCATION," VOL. 27 (MAY 1963), 259-61.) (LH)

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Semantics and the Study of Culture

Seymour H. Fersh

"WHY DO men make mistakes?" asks Walter Lippmann, and answers: "Because an important part of human behavior is reaction to the pictures in their heads. Human behavior takes place in relation to a pseudo-environment—a representation, which is not quite the same for any two individuals. What they suppose to be—not what *is*—the reality of things. This man-made, this cultural environment, which has its being in the minds of men, is interposed between man as a biological organism and the external reality."

The problem is one of bringing "pictures in the mind" and "external reality" into truer alignment. The best way—though certainly not infallible—is through first-hand experiences, followed by audio-visual representations, and lastly by words. It is through words, however, that most of our "education" takes place and much is inevitably lost in the telling as word descriptions are substituted for their real-life counterparts. Consider words such as poverty, underdeveloped, hot, cold, democratic, progressive, backward, and the like. Dictionaries carry definitions but people carry connotations—and it is connotations which rule thinking and influence behavior.

Throughout history many writers in many cultures have called attention to the fact that words misinform as well as inform, but it was not until 1897 that a Frenchman, Michel Breal, gave it the name *semantique,* or the science of meaning. More recently, in the 1920's in the United States, a movement called General Semantics, often referred to as G.S., was pioneered by Alfred Korzybski and subsequently popularized by researchers and writers, including Stuart Chase, Wendell Johnson, S. I. Hayakawa, and Irving Lee.

From these and other writers on the subject, we have drawn a number of examples to illustrate the contribution General Semantics can make to the study of other peoples and ways of living different from our own. Although these particular examples refer to India, it is obvious that they are equally applicable to other cultures. We do not claim that greater attention to these and other G.S. assumptions and techniques will in itself eliminate all problems of "*meaning,*" but it should be incontestable that descriptions of "things out there" can and must be conveyed more precisely and with more accurate interpretation.

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Some Applications

No two things are identical, and no one thing remains the same.

For example: Indian$_1$ is not Indian$_2$ is not Indian$_3$ is not Indian$_4$. . . . In other words Indian (Nehru) is not Indian (Krishna Menon) is not Indian (farmer in a rural village). . . . Although by convention we refer to the 450 million people who live in an area called India as "Indians," the truth is that no two Indians are identical. Statements which purport to talk about "the Indians" as if they were one entity must be carefully qualified. Questions like "What do Indians think about Americans?" become clearly unanswerable. Answerable questions—those which have some likelihood of being verified—are less dramatic and perhaps less satisfying, but that is the nature of the problem. It is only by taking liberties with language that we appear to be better informed than the data permits. Similarly, it may readily be seen that terms such as "Asian," "Moslem," "Oriental," and the like conceal differences as well as reveal group affinities.

India$_{1857}$ is not India$_{1947}$ is not India$_{1962}$ is not India$_{1970}$. . . . Change is certain. One who forgets this is destined to be shocked when confronted with the discrepancy between what he thinks is true and what is so.

The same word may be used to connote different "realities," while similar events or experiences are sometimes called by different names.

For example, a term like "socialism" is used by many to describe economic systems like those of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and India—systems which first-hand examination reveals as quite dissimilar. Consider, for instance, that in "capitalist" United States$_{1962}$ the part of the Gross National Product represented by federal, state, and local governmental expenditures was well over twice the percent purchased by similar governmental bodies in "socialist" India$_{1962}$. Words whose meanings have become meaningless from being used to carry too heavy and too diversified loads of information should be set apart by enclosing them with quotation marks (" ") to alert the reader. Korzybski used to wiggle two fingers of each hand to achieve the same effect when speaking.

Statements of opinion are often confused with statements of fact. For example, verb forms of "to be" often cloud the relationship between sugject and predicate, as when someone says, "It *is* hot." The "hotness" is more a description of the speaker's state of mind than it is of the temperature reading, since what constitutes "hot" is a matter of opinion. "Cold wave" could mean anything from 20 or 30 degrees below zero (F) in the Himalayas to 40 degrees above in New Delhi where, incidentally, a continuous string of days in the 90's in May would scarcely qualify as a "heat wave." Very often, the addition by the speaker of the words "to me" and the addition by the listener of the words "to you" helps to identify so-called statements of fact as bogus.

It is not possible to tell all about anything.

No matter how complete a listing or how comprehensive an explanation, the possibility always remains open that something more might be said about the matter under consideration. All descriptions are "open-ended" with the last word unsaid. Completeness may be a goal, but like infinity it eludes mortal grasp. Thus, for example, an examination of Hinduism might include reference to reincarnation, caste, Karma, and so on, but no matter how extensive the treatise a mental "etc." should be added to the last punctuation point. The practical effect of this orientation is to leave the door open, albeit a crack, for additional information which may be forthcoming.

Some Suggestions

The list of "devices" for applying G.S. can be extended almost indefinitely. Here are a few more cautions to consider:

—Try to use descriptive terms rather than those expressing approval or disapproval. For example, the words "clean" and "unclean" are relative. The comment that cow dung is used for fuel in many Indian villages often provokes reactions of disgust from many urban dwellers in the United States$_{1962}$. It may be instructive on this point to quote from a Kansas editor, writing in 1879 at a time when buffalo and cow dung (he calls them "chips") were commonly used for fuel: "It was comical to see how gingerly our wives handled these chips at first. They commenced by picking them up between two sticks, or with a poker. Soon they used a rag, and then a corner of their apron. Finally, growing hardened, a washing after handling them was sufficient. And now? Now it is out of the bread, into the chips and back again—and not even a dust of the hands."

—Try to use phrases which indicate certain conditions which should be considered with a statement. For example, awareness may be increased by using such phrases as "in our culture," "from our point of view," "at that time," and the like.

An article by David Mace, "Marriage by Arrangement" (*McCall's*, August 1959) illustrates the miscalculations which result from assuming that other cultures hold the same values as one's own. The author writes about an experience he had in India when discussing Western "romance marriages" which he assumed would be the envy of those who were "doomed" to marriages which were arranged by the parents:

> "Wouldn't you like to be free to choose your own marriage partner?" I asked. "Oh, no!" several voices replied in chorus. I was taken aback. "Why not?" I asked.
>
> "Doesn't it put the girl in a very humiliating position?" one girl said. . . . "Doesn't she have to try to look pretty, and call attention to herself, and attract a boy, to be sure she'll get married? . . . And if she doesn't want to do that or if she feels it's undignified, wouldn't that mean she mightn't get a husband? . . . Well, surely that's humiliating. It makes getting married a competition, in which the girls fight each other for the boys. And it encourages a girl to pretend she's better than she really is. She has to make a good impression to get a boy, and then she has to go on making a good impression to get him to marry her. . . . In our system, we girls don't have to worry at all. We *know* we'll get married. When we are old enough, our parents find a suitable boy, and everything is arranged. . . . How could we judge the character of a boy we met? We are young and inexperienced. Our parents are older and wiser, and they aren't as easily deceived as we would be. I'd far rather have my parents choose for me. It's important that the man I marry is the right one. I could easily make a mistake if I had to select him myself."

—Try to move in the direction of substituting more precise words for vague ones. For example, it is often said that "heavy rains" fall on India during the monsoon season. The statement would carry more meaning if it were pointed out, for example, that Allahabad, a city in the Ganges Valley, and New York City both receive on the average 40 inches of rain annually *with* the significant difference that New York City gets from two to four inches monthly whereas Allahabad is hit by some 37 inches from June to October.

—Become more alert to the ways in which cultural conditioning shapes one's value judgments. An exercise in seeing one's own culture as it might be seen by a stranger is a useful start. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from Horace Miner's article, "Magical Practices Among the Nacirema" (*American Anthropologist* 55:3; 1956).

> The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. . . . The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper."

Of course, here Miner has been discussing the medicine cabinet in American culture!

—Become more suspicious of one's own "wisdom." Anatole France once said of a man, "He flattered himself on being a man without prejudices; and this pretention itself is a very great prejudice." In *The Devil's Advocate: A Plea for Superstition,* written in 1909, Sir James G. Frazer argued that so-called superstitions more often than not embody a realistic distillation of experience whereby the uninitiated and unwary may receive tested guidance. Behind many "myths" are "truths" which have helped people to rationalize and maintain social order and organization. Thus, for example, the "superstition" held widely in many Asian countries that the left hand is "evil" or in some ways inferior to the right hand becomes more acceptable to the Western-minded when he becomes familiar with the functions for which the left hand is reserved exclusively—functions which he would readily agree were "unclean" and worthy of giving the left hand its "bad reputation."

Some Implications

Of course, much of what has been pointed out will not come as a startling revelation. None of the ideas are new and, under different names, many of the G.S. techniques have been used by intelligent people who have never heard of the word "semantics," let alone been exposed to the writings of Korzybski and others. So much the better! Our concern is not so much with *how* people distinguish between a "map" and the physical territory that it describes, but that they *do* distinguish. George Orwell writes, "What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. . . . Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures and sensations."

No one is suggesting that all abstractions be distrusted. "In demanding that people cease reacting to abstract names as if they were realities-in-themselves," says S. I. Hayakawa, "we are merely saying in another way, 'Stop acting like suckers.'" And until we do give more disciplined attention to words, we will continue to stockpile symbols and labels while the "precious commodities" which are being symbolized and labeled escape our detection and comprehension. The argument-ending gambit, "It is *only* a matter of semantics," must give way to the more sophisticated recognition that the "real" search for "meaning" may very well start where words leave off.

Suggested Readings

Especially for newcomers to General Semantics

Wendell Johnson. *People in Quandaries.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946. The semantics of personal adjustment.

Catherine Minteer. *Words and What They Do to You.* Elmsford, New York: Row, Peterson and Company, 1953. Beginning lessons in General Semantics for Junior and Senior high school.

Other sources to be read and consulted

Stuart Chase. *The Tyranny of Words.* New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1938.

S. I. Hayakawa. *Language in Thought and Action.* New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949.

Alfred Korzybski. *Science and Sanity.* Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Science Press Printing Company, 1933.